English Story Cycle: The basis of an elementary school English curriculum

Keywords
elementary school English, story, story-time, young learners

This paper proposes the use of stories in the elementary school English curriculum in Japan, offering a rationale for such a curriculum, an outline of how stories can best be used, and a preliminary evaluation of a story-based course sequence. The curriculum, dubbed English Story Cycle, is based on use of a multi-story three-part sequence which provides abundant comprehensible input and meaningful manipulation of the introduced linguistic material. The evaluation reveals notable success in comprehension of the story content and language for learners, along with positive affective outcomes as well.

本論は，日本の小学校英語で，ストーリー（絵本）を使うカリキュラムを提案する。カリキュラムの理論的根拠，ストーリーの使い方の概略，コースに対する初期評価も加える。English Story Cycle を再録したカリキュラムは，複数のストーリーを使う 3 部構成になっている。これらは，豊富な理解可能なインプットや導入された言語材料の意味のある扱いを提供する。評価により，ストーリーの内容や言語が，学習者にとって十分理解できるものであり，学習者に肯定的な感情をもたらすことが明らかになった。

Anthony S. Rausch
Hirosaki University, Faculty of Education

English Story Cycle is an elementary school English educational curriculum based on use of stories, providing either the primary component of the curriculum or a significant part thereof. This approach is based on oral reading of the stories, supported with enlarged pictures of the story content and extended with activities that enhance motivation and develop language skills. The rationale for English Story Cycle is multi-dimensional, the practice is simple yet expandable, and the outcome can be as individualistic as the learners. This article extends reporting (Rausch, 2007) on a preliminary trial and evaluation of an English Story Cycle sequence, identifying outcomes related to content and language and an important balance between the educational value and motivational value of various types of stories that can be used. Using stories in the language classroom is not new. Curtain and Pesola (1988) offer storytelling as a natural choice as a listening activity, citing Wajnryb (1986) for numerous additional pedagogical contributions in the foreign language setting such as its communicative nature, its linguistic honesty, authenticity, and affective nature. Ellis and Brewster (1991) and Wright (1995) both outline extensive methodologies for using stories, and the major publishing companies in Japan have responded with extensive story programs, for example, Oxford University Press's *Story Tree* and Pearson Longman's *Story Street*. The approach to using stories outlined below is a reflection of this pedagogical foundation balanced by the opportunities presented by increasing the learning options in using stories.

The rationale: Combining challenge and comfort

First and foremost, the potential for English Story Cycle should be viewed with recognition that most people, and children in particular, like to be read to. Having a story read to us is a pleasurable and fulfilling experience, which, depending on the content of the story and the manner of the reading of the story, can be as relaxing or as stimulating as it is educational. Stories simultaneously connect with us through our experiences while also calling on us to use our imagination, both creative and linguistic. Ultimately, stories can also focus on appropriate linguistic content, including language that learners may know, as well language that expands existing boundaries in the target language. In this, English Story Cycle provides the learner with a combinative feeling of confidence and challenge—confidence based on their understanding of the story and challenge in the appropriately challenging language that the story offers. Stories provide a stable text—a text that has accurate, authentic, and appropriate language as the base for an elementary school language curriculum. Such a stable text of language and the *de facto* curriculum it provides is important for curriculum planning and implementation for elementary school teachers in Japan—there is no need to develop either curriculum or the target language of a curriculum. The story provides the themes, the language, and the basis for a range of activities. Stories provide a text that is appropriate for repetition—in multiple readings of a story—important for the systematic and consistent introduction of language, vital in maintaining a positive affective attitude in beginning level learners while giving them the multiple exposures to the story as the comprehensible input that provides the basis for language learning.

In practice: Overlapping processes

Most approaches to using stories include a three-part progression of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. The pre-reading activities create anticipation for the story while introducing the background or general theme of the story, with the while-reading component consisting of activities that engage the learner actively in the content and language of the story and the post-reading activities functioning to reinforce, practice, and apply the learned language. English Story Cycle follows this three-step approach, but highlights multiple readings, both of a single story, but ideally of multiple stories in a cyclical pattern where several stories are used within a class term. The readings are, however, highly controlled and undertaken with specific objectives and usually accompanied by visual support in the form of enlarged pictures from the story along with a variety of learner activities, some simple and others more complex and individualistic. A single story should be read multiple times over the course of several classes, and several stories should be read in an overlapping manner. This not only ensures that the initial period of getting used to stories-as-English-instruction is followed by meaningful learning, but also provides the learners with a sense of accomplishment (for the books previously read) and anticipation (for the books to be read).

A sample multi-story cycle

To illustrate an English Story Cycle, following a pre-reading introduction, which could be as simple as showing the pictures of the story with no oral reading, the first reading of a story (Story A), is done slowly and with very clear enunciation, which assists learners in their first attempt at comprehending the story content. In this reading, learners should be focused on the story pictures and the clearly enunciated language. The second reading of Story A, taken up in the next class, is done with a story-content focus as a while-reading activity, using, for example, a handout with pictures from the story in a scrambled arrangement. Learners work to number the pictures in order as the story is being read, with the teacher providing visual support through the depictions of the story. Time permitting, the end of this class period would be ideal for pre-reading activities for a second story (Story B). An activity which connects the visual support with listening can also be done by mixing up the order of the story or reading parts of the story at random, thereby forcing students to focus more intently on the language than on the story. At a later point, such a visual-listening connection activity for any story can be done on the basis of reading alone, without the support of the accompanying pictures, forcing the students to listen for the order of the story. Such activities can also be organized as individual or group work, with students in the latter putting pictures of the story in order as a group.

From the third reading of Story A and on to the fourth and fifth readings, learners need not focus directly on the story pictures, provided they are given some sort of activity. The idea is that the learner is stimulated linguistically through listening to the reading of the story while being

Figure 1: English Story Cycle reading activity sequence by class and story

Class meeting	Story A	Story B	Story C	Story D	Story E
Class 1	Pre-reading; While-reading; Post-reading				
Class 2	While-reading; Post-reading; Assessment 1	Pre-reading; While-reading			
Class 3	While-reading	Pre-reading; While-reading; Assessment 2			
Class 4			Pre-reading; While-reading		
Class 5			While-reading	Pre-reading; While-reading	
Class 6				While-reading; Assessment 3	Pre-reading; While-reading; Post-reading
Class 7	Post-reading; While-reading; Final Assessment	Post-reading; While-reading; Final Assessment	Post-reading; While-reading; Final Assessment	Post-reading; While-reading; Final Assessment	Post-reading; While-reading; Final Assessment
Class 8	Post-reading	Post-reading	Post-reading	Post-reading	While-reading Post-reading

stimulated on a different level through some activity, whether it is coloring a favorite scene from the story (very effective for younger learners, with each student being able to choose a favorite scene to be prepared for the next class) or solving a picture puzzle based on scenes from the story. A while-reading activity could also involve a specific focus on some content or linguistic element — *Who did what?* and action verbs *Sam ran to his bicycle*, or *What was it like?* with adjectives *The room was messy* — with these elements highlighted by dramatic stress in the reading. The theatrical nature of such reading provides for a meaningful contribution by the Assistant Language Teacher, who can effectively control their reading of the story. The specific nature and objective of any activity is less important than the fact that it provides the learner with some engaging activity to accompany the listening. Ideally, the classroom teacher, a trained elementary school teacher, will be able to develop activities based on their assessment of the learner characteristics, with the language input a function of the story.

In lessons when the third and fourth readings of Story A are being undertaken, the first and second readings of Story B are being done. This is an important point in developing the learners understanding that language, and learning a language, does not consist of discrete events temporally and thematically separated from each other. Language, like language learning and use, is a progression, sometimes clearly demarcated, sometimes a bit jumbled, through many themes and activities. Rather than focusing on a single element, whether cast as one story or a single activity, it is better to prepare the students for the

ambiguity and multi-dimensional reality that is language in use. This also appeals to the variety of learner interests—knowing that a story one may not like will be followed soon by another story that one may like provides for an ongoing motivational contribution to the course. In the final readings of any particular story and as a bridge to post-reading activities, learners can be invited to participate in the reading, either describing scenes with key words or phrases or speaking a dialogue that may occur in the story. Examples of activities would include asking students to identify a key word from a scene in the story: *park, tree, firefighter*. These can be expanded to include representational elements and grammatical elements: *a messy park, the big tree (not the small one), four firefighters* and short phrases: *the park was messy, the firefighters cut the tree.* Students need not write down these words and phrases in English; notes written in Japanese about the content (a while-reading activity) can serve as mental triggers to remembering the comprehensible input provided with the reading. Again, the specific sections of the story selected for student participation and the manner of participation is less important than the fact that there is some form of participation. The degree of linguistic or grammatical instruction and correction is left to the discretion of the teacher, depending on the nature of the class and students.

While the overlapping nature of these pre-, while-, and post-reading activities is both important in ensuring a stimulating and integrated pace to working with the stories and that there is always a story and an activity that is of interest to each student, the primary objective of English Story Cycle is that the language is experienced, recognized, and understood (as in the story), with transfer to a participatory action that leads to communication. It is important to remember that it is in the repetition of the stories, with each reading and the accompanying activity slightly different from the last, that the learners create their own connections with the stories, and the language of the stories.

Preliminary evaluation of English Story Cycle

On the basis of an eight-class, five-story English Story Cycle conducted as described for a fifth-grade class and outlined above in Figure 1, the following preliminary findings could be identified. Over the course of the cycle, learners showed

Table 1. Overall learner evaluation of English Story Cycle stories

Story position in sequence and story type					
Learner evaluation	Story A *ESL*	Story B *ESL*	Story C *Real*	Story D *ESL*	Story E *Real*
Interesting story	13-15-2	16-16-3	**23-8-4**	16-16-5	**27-7-2**
Difficult story	6-14-15	3-13-17	8-11-12	7-15-10	5-12-15
Likable characters	15-15-5	14-9-11	**26-4-3**	13-12-8	**23-8-3**
Interesting vocabulary	7-17-7	**18-9-7**	15 -13-4	12-15-7	16-12-4
Stimulating pictures	**20-8-5**	**20-10-4**	**21-10-2**	16-14-4	**27-3-4**
Want to hear again	4-23-5	11-14-9	13-17-3	12-14-7	**20-13-1**

Note: *ESL* indicates an ESL series story; *Real* indicates a non-ESL storybook.

[a] N= the count on a Likert assessment (*agree*, *somewhat agree*, and *disagree*) to the prompt statements for each book.

[b] Responses of particular interest are indicated in bold type.

positive responses to stories and activities.Four specific sets of assessments were conducted. The first (Assessment 1, Figure 1) asked students to provide a brief explanation (in Japanese) to three story comprehension points (description or reference to three main characters of a story) after a second reading. Twenty of thirty-five learners were able to provide correct reference to all three with an additional thirteen able to do so for two. Assessment 2 consisted of an open-ended prompt about the content of a story, which yielded two response patterns (in Japanese): one that focused on the specific actions of the main characters in the story and the other on actions of characters in a specific story setting. Assessment 3 consisted of an open-ended prompt to write any interesting vocabulary or phrases noticed in a story, with responses accepted in English, *katakana* reflecting the English pronunciation, or the Japanese term corresponding to the English. Fifteen learners provided over ten references to story vocabulary that they had noticed, with an additional fifteen providing from five to ten words or phrases.

A Final Assessment conducted at the end of the eight-class sequence captured student reactions to the five different stories that were used (three ESL-oriented stories, two real stories). Assessments were made on the basis of a three-point Likert scale regarding the story content (interesting or difficult), the characters, the vocabulary, the story pictures, and the desirability of hearing the story again. While the stories were deemed interesting and accessible, which is to say not too difficult, with positive responses regarding characters, vocabulary, and pictures, there was notable difference in responses between the five different stories that had been introduced over the eight classes (see Table 1).

Discussion and further research

The use of English Story Cycle as reported on herein was exploratory and highly preliminary, but the outcomes suggest further research. Based on the assessments, it appears that for the learners, story comprehension was notable and there was a clear awareness of language. The overall results regarding the five stories show a need to ensure a balance between the educational value of the ESL stories and the motivational value of the real stories on the basis of content and characters. Given the limited extent of this investigation, questions regarding English Story Cycle in the elementary school English curriculum remain. First of all, there is the question as to whether English Story Cycle should be adopted as a primary component of the curriculum or rather a supplementary component. In favor of a cyclical approach as a primary component, there is the fact that use of stories provides extensive and stable language input which can be expanded to include post-reading communicative activities. Development of such a range of expanded activities that emerge out of the while-reading activities constitutes an area for further research. Finally, development of a means of assessment for English Story Cycle is needed, as English will constitute a part of the elementary school curriculum from 2011.

Conclusion

English Story Cycle offers an approach for elementary school English in Japan that is both pragmatic and flexible, an approach that provides abundant, stable, and accurate linguistic input on which to build both receptive and productive language skills. This approach, together with the research derived from it, although preliminary, confirms that English Story Cycle can present content and language that is comprehensible and that yields an awareness of the target language. Future research objectives call for a focus on more informed input practices and an expansion of communication-oriented output activities.

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…with Myles Grogan

<my-share@jalt-publications.org>

We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 700 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used which can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see any edition of *The Language Teacher*). Please send submissions to <my-share@jalt-publications.org>.

MY SHARE ONLINE

A linked index of My Share articles can be found at:
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THIS MONTH sees another bumper edition of the My Share column! First, Mark Rebuck combines English and Japanese with an activity on student-made kanji idioms. Andrew Hayes gives us an activity to help students think about how they work together in class. Byron O'Neill and Russell Hubert get students to find out more about each other with their lesson idea. Finally, Jason Williams and Chris Creighton give us a model for setting up communication between classes—with a school newspaper!

Kanji-compound presentation

Mark Rebuck
Nagoya University
<reebuk67@yahoo.co.jp>

Quick Guide

Key words: four-character kanji idiom, presentation

Learner English level: Beginner to advanced

Learner maturity: High school to university

Preparation time: Minimal

Activity time: About one minute for each student

Materials: Original idioms handout (see Appendix)

Introduction

I got the idea for this activity when I was studying for level 2 of the Japanese Kanji Aptitude Test, a section of which tests the examinees' knowledge of some of the numerous four-character kanji idioms (四字熟語 *yojiyukugo*) found in the language. While some idioms that have their origin in Chinese legends or obscure Buddhist texts are unlikely to be understood even by many native Japanese speakers, others are commonly used and comprise an indispensable part of the modern Japanese lexicon. For example, most TLT readers probably carry a mobile phone or 携帯電話 (*keitai denwa*) and pay for their health insurance—国民保健 (*kokuminhoken*)—out of what they have earned by working 一生懸命 (*isshokenmei*—earnestly).

I thought it would be interesting to have my students create their own four-character kanji idioms and provide explanations and commentary to the class. This activity gives students an opportunity to be creative with the Japanese language, and then requires them to translate and convey their ideographically bound ideas into English. Learners are genuinely interested to see and hear about the idioms created by their classmates and motivated to do their own kanji creations justice with an interesting oral presentation. Teachers also will find that the activity provides an insight into the current preoccupations and concerns of their students.

Preparation

Prepare handouts or an OHP with a few examples of original four-character kanji idioms and accompanying explanations. The idioms created by three of my students in the appendix can be used, or readers could make their own examples or ask a colleague.

Procedure

Step 1: Elicit the term *yojijukugo* by writing two or three common four-character kanji idioms on the board and asking students what such idioms are called in Japanese. Tell students that in English they are commonly termed *four-character kanji idioms*.

Step 2: Explain to your students that the following week they will give a short presentation (no longer, perhaps, than 3 minutes) of an original four-character kanji idiom. For homework, students create the idiom and write a paragraph or two explaining its meaning. Tell them that the idiom can be about anything, but if they think about their feelings or what's happening in their lives,